

This paper is a passionate and prophetic theological work! I resonate strongly with much that the author expresses. I also recognize at the outset that reading the paper sympathetically without also doing so honestly and critically would be to engage in the same patronizing attitude that that the writer properly resents. I take this way of entering into a "conversation" with it and with its author.

As with Father Allick, my own cultural background is important in weighing my response to his paper. I am a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 80 years old, having spent most of my career in the academic world. My childhood was spent in northern Wisconsin during the years of the great depression. Our house had no interior sheathing over its bare studding. We had two cows, we gardened, and what money we had came from a series of handy-man jobs that my courageous and mechanically-adept father could attract. He refused public assistance. It was the most wonderful childhood any child could have, with all the world for a playground!

Military service provided an avenue to higher education and eventually to theological seminary. I was a dutiful, moderately good, theological student, but with a lot of reservations about the standard Reformed theology I was learning. My subsequent career involved serving for several years in secular educational projects in West Africa, including three years as a visiting professor of Humanities in a new university development in Nigeria. The experience was life-changing and illuminating in terms of the cultural perceptions of God, leading to my own spiritual and intellectual processing of the relationship between Christ and culture.

A DICEY REALITY: Race, Class, Culture and Christ

By The Reverend Paul DeLain Allick

This essay has been a labor of love and concern written, re-worked, added to and subtracted from for the past six years. It is an outflow of my deepest thoughts and emotions around what it means to be a multi-cultural person in the Mainline Church. It is offered as an instigation of what I perceive to be a much needed conversation. It is offered as a contribution to the clarity we all seek around race, class, and culture in the Church.

WHERE I BEGIN

Race, class and culture for me have been both a captivating celebration and a dicey reality. In my extended family there is a considerable array of race, class and culture. It has been difficult for me to "pick" one way of seeing and being in the world. Among my ancestors there are Roman Catholics, Muslims, Cree, French, Anglo, Chicano, and Lebanese people.

I lived among my American Indian relatives and experienced life on the Reservation. I lived among my Euro-American relatives and experienced an average "white" American way of life.

We ate run of the mill "American" food but there was also Middle Eastern, Mexican-

American and American Indian foods. When it came to religion there were the Muslim prayer books, Roman Catholic statues and candles, Born-again revivals and even relatives by marriage who were members of the Reorganized Latter-Day-Saints. For the most part my family was working class although we were touched by periods of abundance and poverty.

As I moved onto college, the first person in my immediate family to do so, and as I was received into the Episcopal Church I came up against a harsh reality: most people grow up in one culture. Most people experience the world through one lens. The Episcopal Church is operated out of one lens. There is one measure by which all of what we do is considered. The Episcopal Church, while it has done outreach to other "cultures", is dominated by upper class Euro-American culture. Our meetings, our language, our music, our politics, our governing habits, all of these are projected through this particular lens. As I traversed the institutional avenues of the Episcopal Church, discerning and studying to be a priest, I found that both my working class and multi-ethnic lenses kept me on the outside. I was always catching up and trying to catch on. It dawned on me at some point that while most of my classmates grew up reading the classics, I grew up watching Hee-Haw! While most of my peers were raised to see the world as their own, I was just trying to understand where I would fit into their world. Would I have to change my worldview, my language, my piety to fit in? And if I did that how would that impact my relationships with my family and communities?

My service as a priest has allowed me to venture into other cultural settings within the institution. I have served American Indian, African-American, Euro-American and young adult communities. What I noticed when I was serving in non-dominant communities is that I was constantly being called on to act as a translator to the powers; always the one in the room reminding the majority that others existed within the Church. Always sitting through Diocesan liturgies, conferences and meetings that did not speak to my piety or experience and certainly did not speak to the piety and experience of those I was serving.

Many of us are often invited by the powers to "share" our cultural experiences but this "sharing" is always an extra component. It is almost never the center. And in those rare circumstances when it is the center, particularly in my diocese a Native American liturgy, it still somehow seems forced and dominated by outside forces.

Some stories:

In my seminary about two percent of the student body was not of the upper class Euro-American clan. I particularly remember clergy visitors and their spouses asking African-American students where the towels were or how they could get something cleaned up. They assumed that any brown person in the halls of that institution were there as janitorial or housekeeping staff. (For our Euro-American readers: I am not exaggerating this point. It really happened.)

One time in seminary, after others had learned that I was part American Indian, a student came to me asking if I could come to the spirituality class and teach them some "Indian" rituals. It was assumed that American Indian people were monolith. While it was an effort to be inclusive, it was offered through that assumptive lens of power and privilege.

In the American Indian world it takes years for someone to be seen as ready to lead

ceremony. To ask someone like me, who knew next to nothing of the traditions and language nor had gone through the deep spiritual preparation required to lead ceremony, would be like asking a third grade acolyte to come in and do the Eucharist.

When I served at a predominantly African-American parish, I was constantly being asked to join with other Churches in special services. "Could your choir come and sing?" Well, if we had a choir, maybe. One diocesan liturgical planner called me once and asked, "Can you get some of your folks to be readers at the Eucharist? We're trying to get different people involved". I was so tempted to recruit and send one of our Anglo members.

When people come out of the middle to upper class Euro-American milieu, they are blind to the way they sound. What it sounds like to brown people is, "Can you come and perform for us? Your presence will make us feel diverse. We won't change anything about ourselves, the way we pray or relate, but it would make us feel so good to see your brown face up front." As an astute Lakota friend recently observed, "Do we want to change the faces at the table or change the table?"

A good point! It is also a very penetrating insight that Euro-American culture and associated churches miss completely. We -- yes, we -- are committed to the achievement of diversity in all that we do; but it is diversity at our own table. This is a key issue in any discernment related to the future of the church, Episcopal or otherwise. I'm sorry I was so blind to it! The issue is how we are going to change the table.

I feel that Father Allick overlooks the possibility that the efforts to achieve diversity are honest, if ignorant, attempts to achieve the unity of humankind they believe is the intent of Christ, and not simply an way to "feel diverse." That having been said, I recognize that it is not easy to distinguish between the feeling of diversity and its actual achievement. I would also agree that "feeling diverse" could lead to an offensive self-satisfaction!

This could very well be a turning -point in the paper -- or in this conversation -- where we begin to examine ways that Christian folk can begin to "change the table" -- not just from "your table" to "my table", but something that can be truly "our table." or, better yet, God's table!

Experience has taught me that cultural assumptions are some of the most damning barriers to hearing the Gospel and living into it. Our cultural assumptions lead us to equate our way of seeing and being with the movement of the Holy Spirit. Culture breeds theology and ideology. In order to live into the ministry of reconciliation we need to humble our cultural assumptions. There is a devastating price to pay for equating our culture with our religion.*****

"In order to live into the ministry of reconciliation we need to humble our cultural assumptions." That is certainly true, although exceedingly difficult. Consistency in dthe argument also requires acknowledgement that it applies to all participants in the reconciliation. Granted that at any point in history some cultures may require more "humbling" than others! Jesus' admonition is that we not try to pick the speck from another's eye if there is a log in our own!

Here is where the paper intersects with my own concerns for the achievement of "catholicity" in the Church, or "ecumenicity" in its literal meaning. This may be the spot

to start that essay. We'll see.

CATCHING UP ON MY READING

In the summer of 2001, five years past seminary, I finally set about reading H. Richard Niebuhr's influential work, *Christ and Culture*. Obviously it is a topic close to my heart.

After finishing my read, my thoughts were absorbed in what Niebuhr called "the enduring problem." That is, how does Christianity relate to culture? Is Christianity to be completely estranged from one's cultural context? Where does the gospel message end and one's cultural assumptions begin?

This discussion was drawn out in vivid colors as I read the front page feature article in the September 2001 edition of *Episcopal Life*. The article *They Will Be Forever Changed*, features the stories of modern day Episcopal lay missionaries. The feature is accompanied by a color photo of Scott and Carol Kellerman of Nevada City, California. Mr. Kellerman holds his arm around his wife. They clasp hands. They stare determinately into the camera. These are Episcopalians on a mission.

I wondered if the actors in this story both the missionaries and the author ever considered what impact their culture had on their Christian faith. I wondered if they knew that when they went into a foreign culture as missionaries, they were not just bringing the gospel but also the particularities and limitations of their own cultural experiences.

To be certain, the author wasn't asking these questions. The article focused on how being a missionary felt. There was no discussion of the cultural intersections taking place nor were there interviews with the recipients of the missionary work.

According to the piece, Carol Kellerman had a fascination with the Pygmy (Batwa) people since childhood. She had been on other mission trips for short periods, but only her concern for the Batwa people could prod her to relocate to Africa for an extended time. Despite the rustic conditions without running water, phone, or electricity, she and her husband, Scott, an internist and specialist in tropical diseases, went to Africa to work with the Batwa people.

Frances and Vernon Wilson of Poquoson, Virginia "Let go of their comfortable home and car to act on Frances' long held dream." to do mission work. Frances felt that her skills as a lay leader were a "dime a dozen" in her home parish. Vernon always wanted to be a teacher, but lacked the appropriate certification. As missionaries to Belize, the Wilsons found themselves to be highly valued agents.

The article reports that in 2001 there were some 212 Episcopal missionaries active in foreign missions. We are told that their work went beyond converting souls for Christ to a focus on humanitarian efforts. This work involved teaching, administrating, and preaching. At the time there was hope for more youth workers, lawyers, scientists, communication professionals and orphanage directors to join in this mission work.

The article is replete with stories of how much this work changes the missionaries as well as their congregations back home. Herb McMullan, a rector whose congregation supports missionaries, is quoted: "As soon as somebody steps across a cultural boundary. we

collectively are the beneficiaries and we are changed." The collective here appears to be the missionaries and their friends back home. There is no discussion of how the recipients of the mission work might be changed or how they are beneficiaries of such work.

How is the presence of affluent, educated Americans affecting the everyday lives of the people of these foreign lands? The reporter never mentions it. This would lead one to assume that the interest lies not with the mission-ized people themselves, but of the Euro-Americans who leave behind the conveniences of modern America, sacrificing phones, running water, and electricity to bring some civilization to the farthest reaches.

There is a problem in arguing from what is not said and building an assumption on that premise. It relates to the particular audience and the point that is being made. The idea that the missionaries might themselves be changed is a relatively new and refreshing perspective! More about missionaries later from my own experience in Africa.

The Rev. E.A. "Tad" deBordenave III, identified as the director of Anglican Frontier Missions which focuses on nations where Christianity is unknown refers to the people being mission-ized as the "lost". He is quoted, "They get a bigger view of God's love and God's power and the sense of Jesus being a shepherd who goes after the lost."

The Rev. Jane Butterfield, who in 2001 was the mission personnel officer for the National Episcopal Church Center, identified missionaries this way, "I see them as real explorers, advancing the fringes of God."

The two prior paragraphs are the blunt statement of the old-fashioned culturally-biased rationale for missions! I am surprised to read it in an age when the missionary movements of the 19th and 20th centuries are under the critical scrutiny of history as agents of colonialism. The idea that missionaries are "advancing the fringes of God" is theologically offensive by any standard, implying that somehow the Church is God's custodian! (The appeal to the cultural and religious bias at home is, of course, the standard fund-raising pitch of the missionary societies.) These considerations aside, I have known missionaries in the field who approached their cultural environments with respect and humility, convinced that they were not bringing Christ to their mission field, but somehow finding him there!

The Lost? Frontier Missions? Explorers? The Fringes? These words mixed with European good intentions are all too familiar to some Episcopalians, especially Episcopalians of D/Lakota, Ojibwa, and Winnebago heritage. They, too, were seen as "lost." They needed to be helped by educated Euro-Americans. They, too, were out on the frontier, the fringes of God.

Alongside my reflections on Niebuhr's work, the article also caused me to mull over the Bishop Henry Whipple centennial events going on in my home diocese of Minnesota in the summer of 2001. Consecrated in 1859, Bishop Whipple was the first Bishop of the Diocese of Minnesota. Whipple is celebrated as a friend of the aboriginal people of Minnesota.

The intersection of 19th Century Episcopalians and the Indigenous Nations is as much a study of Christ and culture as is the modern situation. Like Whipple, and the Episcopal

clergy and laity that worked with him, modern missionaries have good intentions. Theirs is a desire to bring a message of love and hope to people of other lands whom they perceive to be in need.

The Episcopal Church as it exists today, like so many mainline denominations, is suffering not just from unintentional institutional racism, but perhaps even more injurious, an acute state of theological famine. *(You can say that again!)* The article on the missionaries, if it had included some theological reflections and some conversation with people encountering the missionaries, might have engaged the community in a needed conversation about Christianity and culture.

This one-dimensional approach is a mistake and itself reflects an inherent notion of cultural supremacy. The Episcopal Church holds countless workshops on racism, passes innumerable resolutions about racism, and proclaims to be confronting racism head on. By ignoring cultural influences and the history of cultural intersections, the Church remains ignorant and aimless in its efforts to heal racial, ethnic and cultural wounds.

Christianity, like any religion, has always been steeped in cultural assumptions. From its inception it has struggled with incorporating cultural nuances into its language and images. Christians of every epoch have carried with them the baggage of culture. Henry Whipple came from an affluent eastern background. This Bishop assumed that to be civilized, one needed to farm, hold private property, and read and speak English. The modern missionaries perhaps assume that to be truly civilized is to have a phone, electricity and a parish church modeled upon American suburban customs and conveniences.

In the encounter between the citizens of contemporary America and folk from places such as Belize and Uganda, no one involved will be the same again. They will all be forever changed.

NIEBUHR'S ENDURING PROBLEM

H. Richard Niebuhr called the task of separating Christ from culture and likewise, defining Christ and culture, as an "enduring problem." He begins with illustrating Jesus' own conflicts with culture. Jesus continually battled cultural norms of his day. Jesus states in the gospels, "My kingdom is not of this world." Jesus sets himself outside any particular human system of interaction. Niebuhr writes, "instead of reforming culture, he (Jesus) ignored it". (Niebuhr, p.3)

From its inception as a social and religious movement, Christianity has encountered cultures hostile -- or at least aloof -- to its message. St. Paul used Jewish tradition and Hellenist philosophy as well as the Greek language to explain the gospel of Christ. (Niebuhr, p.3) Thus, St. Paul was one of the first in a succession of Christian evangelists and thinkers to acculturate the message of Jesus.

In attempting to define Christ, Niebuhr states that the problem of definition is that it is impossible to make any statement about Christ without the declaration being tied to some faction of the church or an historical/cultural context. (Niebuhr, p. 14) He reviews common of interpretations of Christ: Christ is a great teacher, a revelation of God, founder of a new

society (the church), a socialist reformer, or even a mild gentleman. (Niebuhr, pp.11-12) On other counts, Christ is presented as the perfection of love, of hope, and of faith. (Niebuhr, pp. 15, 19, 22)

Niebuhr settles on a definition which brings the concept of the Christ to a succinct point: "To be related in devotion and obedience to Jesus Christ is to be related to the One to whom he undeviatingly points" In this way, Christ points away from "All that is conditioned to all that is unconditioned." (Niebuhr, p.28) Christ transcends contextual boundaries to call his followers back to a radical rooted-ness in God. Christ is not a European, an Episcopalian, nor is He an Ojibwa. Niebuhr writes, "In his single-minded direction toward God, Christ leads men away from the temporality and pluralism of culture." (Niebuhr, p.39) In the end, Christ disturbs culture.

Unlike Christ, his followers are not able to point undeviatingly to God. We must be observant that Christ is not the product of our culture. We have to be vigilant in evaluating our motivations in order to convey the good news of the Gospel in an unadulterated form.

Niebuhr proceeds to work out definitions of culture. He ends with the definition of culture, simply stated, as the "temporal and material realization of values." (Niebuhr, p.36)

Niebuhr also concludes that the enduring problem of Christ and culture can be neither solved nor defined, yet he offers 5 motifs of how the problem is dealt with by Christians. I find Niebuhr's motif The Christ of Culture most adequately addresses the problem raised in the feature article and the difficult history of Episcopalian missionaries among the Aboriginal peoples of North America.

Niebuhr offers this assessment of those who live into the Christ of Culture motif, "Christ is identified with what man conceives to be their finest ideals, their noblest institutions, and their best philosophies." (Niebuhr, p.103) The very act of missionizing is to say, "We have the correct/best ideals, the correct/best philosophies and the correct/best institutions to help the non-Christian achieve not only a knowledge of Christ's love, but also an acceptable, maybe even complimentary, form of civilization."

The Christ of Culture adherents also are prone to see Jesus as the Messiah of culture. the reformer of culture. This vision not only extends to missionary work but also is borne out in theological concepts at home. Persons who live in this mindset are not given to seeing the whole of their culture as equal to the Christian mission, but only those ideals and institutions they regard as "good". Niebuhr concludes that the ".culturalChristian may confine evil to selected bad institutions, such as ignorant and superstitious religion, or the competitive customs that tempt all men to selfishness, or to other super-personal forces of evil." (Niebuhr, p.112)

The cultural Christian offers to make things better by sharing their expertise and good judgment about how things ought to be done.

LOST HISTORY

From St. Paul incorporating elements of Hellenistic and Jewish culture to the present day

desire of Americans wanting all the world to enjoy the fruits of American consumerism and technology, Christians have carried the gospel wrapped in culture to far off places.

In his book, *Missionary Conquest*, the Rev. George Tinker argues that in a mindset of superiority, the European/Euro-American missionary attempted to replace Indian tribal cultures with what they saw as "Christian Civilization." This was done out of sympathy for what was known as the Indian Problem. The 19th Century missionaries promulgated the idea of the aboriginal people adopting the culture of Euro-Americans and their interpretation of Christianity as the solution to ending the slaughter and forced migration of the aboriginal people as well the armed conflicts so prevalent at the time. (Tinker, p.9)

The Rev. Tinker aptly points out that the tragedy of Euro-American and aboriginal intersection was not necessarily about individuals, but was inherently systemic. (Tinker, p.16) The missionaries who encountered the aboriginal people were operating out of what they knew to be the right way to live. Their assumptions about the superiority of their way of life and their acculturated form of Christianity was so pervasive that it reminds one of the Palmolive soap commercials -- "they were soaking in it" and didn't realize it.

Tinker devotes an entire chapter to the history of Whipple's involvement with the Native people of Minnesota (Henry Benjamin Whipple: *The Politics of Indian Assimilation*). After his 1859 consecration, "Whipple took immediate and rather intense interest in Minnesota Indians as soon as he set foot in his diocese and bore his responsibility seriously over Indian missions and the Native converts". Just 45 days after his consecration, Mr. Whipple traveled into Indian country to meet the aboriginal people. In April 1860, the Bishop wrote a letter to President James Buchanan outlining his suggestions on how to reform the federal government's relations with the Dakota and Ojibwa nations: "In other words, on the basis on just one visit to Indian country in late 1859 shortly after his arrival in Minnesota, Whipple was already proposing solutions to what he perceived as the problems characterizing Indian-white relations." (Tinker, p.96)

Apparently, Henry Whipple saw it as his task to solve the problems the aboriginal nations were facing in light of increasing settler encroachment. He saw his role as mediator. He wanted the aboriginal people to assimilate and get along.

Bishop Whipple, throughout his career, opposed sovereignty for the Indigenous Nations. Whipple thought it was a mistake to enter into a nation-to-nation relationship with a people he saw as having no government and no power. (Tinker, p.108)

Is it not also possible that Whipple saw the disingenuous and devious nature of the treaties themselves and opposed the treaty process on those grounds?

In fact, it may even be that converting the aboriginals to Euro-American civilization became more important than convincing them to become disciples of Christ. Tinker illustrates this point with the story of Nebuneshkung of the White Earth Band, making a request of the Rev. John Johnson (Enmegahbowh), the first aboriginal priest in the Episcopal Church. Enmegahbowh quoted Nebuneshkung in a letter, "If the Great Spirit has so big a love for poor Indian, surely Indian ought and must give back big love. Now, dear brother. to be true to return my big love to the Great Spirit, I brought scissors, to have you cut my hair locks which I shall throw away for ever." (Tinker, p.101)

It is a poignant story, but I can't see how it supports the topic sentence. If anything, the story supports the point that adoption of the missionary culture, while not being the primary intent of conversion, was entirely bound up in it. In the tropical world, the missionaries saw the adoption of clothing as a necessary concomitant of Christian modesty. The following paragraph puts the idea in better perspective.

It must have been perceived by Nebuneshkung that to be Christian, to respond to the redeeming acts of Christ, was to look and act like the Euro-Americans who brought the Gospel to his people. This weakens Christ's true influence on the converted heart. This places Christ in a cultural milieu that does not reflect his message or his own cultural and historical context. (It is ironic that every artistic representation we have of Jesus depicts him with long hair!)

INACCURACY REVISITED

In the Episcopal Life article, Dr. Scott Kellerman is identified as an "expert" in describing the situation of the Batwa people in Uganda, ignoring the simple reality that the Batwa are more informed on the situation than Dr. Kellerman. *Is this sentence not a little bit gratuitous, considering that Kellerman is describing the tragic situation exactly as it is? I would need to read the referenced article, but the sentence following this comment implies pretty clearly that the government of Uganda is relying on Kellerman's expertise to prompt the removal. Or is it only the report that relies on Kellerman? This needs to be clarified. Otherwise it becomes an accusation that requires evidence.*) Relying on Kellerman's said expertise, it is reported that some 2,000 Batwa have been evicted from the Bwindi Impenetrable Forest to make room for a tourist nature reserve. The article states, "When the Pygmies are forced out into the light, they have no immunity to the local culture's diseases, no skill at farming, no language others understand and almost no friends. So they are dying." Bishop Whipple and other Christians of his time had the same concerns for the Aboriginal people of North America.

Instead of defending the sovereignty of the Batwa, the Episcopal Missionaries are, in effect, assisting in their removal. The missionaries attempt to soften the impact of the Batwa's displacement by offering westernized medicine, language, religion and agricultural skills. The Diocese of Kinkiizi (Uganda) with financial aid from the Diocese of Dallas purchased 51 acres of land for 600 Pygmies. The project aims to resettle the Batwa and train the hunter-gathers to be farmers.

Like the Whipple effort in Minnesota (resettling the "natives" and turning them into farmers) the modern missionaries seek to save the Batwa from destruction. They, like Whipple, do this out of compassion. Yet, by making themselves "experts" about others, they run the dramatic risk of wiping out an entire culture.

Will Christianity be separate in the Batwa's minds from the effort to remove them from their home and way of life? For many Ojibwa, D/Lakota, and Winnebago people the Church is not separate from the federal government's efforts to displace them. The Church is remembered as a full partner with the forces which sought to forever eliminate their language, religion, and customs and to remove them from their homes.

Today in the Church, one often hears members distancing themselves from the missionary efforts of the past. In the article, the author, herself, makes the point, "Most missionaries are not sent out to preach against native religions or convert those of other faiths." So if "most" are not converting people, what exactly are they doing? Converting the people to the modern world?

Today's diversity-pronouncing mainline Churches do not like to be associated with the missionaries of the past, yet we continue in the same effort of converting aboriginal people to our way of life. To ease our guilt, we now avoid converting anyone to Christ and simply convert them to western ideals and technology.

Vine Deloria in his book, *God is Red*, writes,

Average Christians when hearing of the disasters wreaked on aboriginal peoples by their religion and its adherents are quick to state, 'But the people who did this were not really Christians'. In point of fact they really were Christians. In their day they enjoyed all the benefits and prestige Christendom could confer. They were cheered as heroes of faith, enduring hardships that a Christian society might be built on the ruins of pagan villages. They were featured in Sunday school lessons as saints of the Christian Church. Cities, rivers, mountains, and seas were named after them (Deloria, pp.261-62)

CONSEQUENCES

As stated earlier, everyone involved in mission activity will be changed forever. There are myriad consequences involved in the type of mission work outlined in this article. A few are summarized below.

Consequences for the Mission-ized

A central consequence for the mission-ized is a loss of identity. Deloria, in *God is Red*, outlines important cultural conflicts between Euro-American missionaries and aboriginal peoples. In looking at his observations, we can delineate what might be lost for those being mission-ized today.

Deloria writes about the concepts of Time and Space. He points out that in the Western traditions revelation was about the deity giving new information, a new plan that everyone was called to follow to the last instruction. The revelation is viewed as applicable to all times and places. But revelation for North American Aboriginals was about the world around them. Revelation was strongly connected to the time and place in which they occurred. He writes, "Context is therefore all-important for both practice and the understanding of reality." (Deloria, pp.66-67)

The concept of history was also different for aboriginals. Religious life did not depend on the historical validity of an event, but on the message, ceremony and power left with the people. (Deloria, pp.99-100) Today, we do see this interpretive approach to scripture taking hold in mainline churches, but this is certainly a new phenomenon for Christianity. One can look to the great debate still raging about creationism vs. evolution to see this played out among Western minds.

Deloria also points to the differences between western Christianity and aboriginal views about religious truth. Aboriginal religions made no claim to universal truth or exclusivity. (Deloria, p.210) Most tribes did not view another tribe's beliefs as wrong but simply different. It follows that when encountering Christianity, aboriginal peoples accepted it as another way of explaining life, not as the truth.

An ongoing consequence for the mission-ized is one that no one, Euro-American nor Aboriginal, like to acknowledge: It is the consequence of a co-dependent relationship. George Tinker in *Missionary Conquest* reflects on this matter.

the various denominations that are present on reservations or in urban Indian communities are hooked into co-dependent relationships with the Indian people they intend to serve. While many denominations have successfully developed something of indigenous leadership, the actual power,

which ultimately determines how Indian people will interpret Christianity and how they will function as churches, is almost always a white authority structure. (Tinker, p.117)

Judicatory powers and the Indigenous congregations often develop a financial co-dependency, but this is because the ***Indigenous congregations are asked to function in the Euro-American model of doing church. They are asked, indeed often required by statute, to run their community as a Euro-American parish, to celebrate the liturgy as Euro-American congregations do, and to provide financial compensation for clergy based on the dominant culture's calculations. In order to function in the Euro-American model, **ndigenous congregations are dependent on the money provided by the denominational structures. Most indigenous Christians, to their own detriment, see no other way of doing church. To be Christian is to function as those who brought the Gospel to the people.*****

Consequences for the whole Body of Christ

In tying Christianity to western ideals, customs, and power relationships, we strip the gospel of its power to be catholic and apostolic. When we serve what 19th Century missionaries called "Christian Civilization" we nullify the New Covenant in Christ. The Covenant - that which makes us a priesthood of all believers, a holy nation, a people of God - is rendered subservient to cultural norms.***

The gospel is catholic; it was intended for all people and for all time. But in order to truly live that out, we must remember Niebuhr's apt definitions of Christ and Culture. Christ being the one who undeviatingly points us to God, the one who "Points away from all that is conditioned to all that is unconditioned." When we wrap Christ in Culture -- that is "our temporal and material realization of values" -- we misrepresent God's intentions for those redeemed in Christ. The Good News loses its cultural malleability and becomes a representative of cultural impositions. *****

We get so tied to how we do church that we forget the apostolic traditions of the early church. We forget that, as Rebecca Lyman reminds us in Early Christian Traditions, the first Christian communities grew because they were flexible and adapted to local customs. The earliest Christians belonged primarily to House Churches. Lyman writes,

Consisting of small house churches bound together by belief and simple ritual, these groups were nourished and formed by the teaching of a traveling missionary. Their liturgical life was simple, involving a regular common meal and baptism for the initiation of new members. (Lyman, p.33)

In this way, being the Church did not require buildings, corporate-type leadership, books, or many of the sorts of things we in the church today deem essential. It was a catholic faith, adaptable to all sorts of circumstances. It was an apostolic faith, based on simple liturgical practices around the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist.

We lose sight of this simplicity at a cost. We complicate the message of Jesus by cloaking it in a modern western suburban style ministry model. And when you add efforts like teaching people to farm and assisting in moving them from their ancestral home, the message of Christ is nearly erased.

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, READ THE CATECHISM

The observations and criticisms offered in this paper are not intended to provide an answer to the problem of historical nor contemporary missionary work. The intention is to draw out the concerns involved.

My disquiet about the article They Will Be Forever Changed is not about faithful Christian men and women seeking to serve Christ in others by being missionaries. My uneasiness has to do with not asking the right questions. For our national Episcopal publication to run this article with no theological reflection is alarming to me.

It says to me that we are not seriously pursuing diverse opinions nor are we intentional about putting current issues into historical and theological context. We can pass anti-racism resolutions, downplay the concept of conversion to Christ, and celebrate modern humanitarian efforts by Episcopalians, but if we do not honor history and the theological queries, we are void of substance. It becomes nothing more than an exercise in comforting language.

From the time Peter was told in a dream to "kill and eat" the unclean food and to find Cornelius, disciples of Christ have struggled with bringing the gospel to people of other beliefs and ways of life. Yet Peter was eventually changed in his heart and mind and went on to argue for the inclusion of the gentiles in the Body of Christ. After supping with Cornelius, being freed from his cultural assumptions, Peter later preached, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." (NRSV, Acts 10:34-35) St. Peter concluded that salvation in Christ was not tied to cultural assumptions.

Perhaps a way for us in the modern Church to approach this predicament of Christ and Culture is to carry in our prayers Peter's statement. God is not partial to nationalism, to language, to custom. God in Christ calls all who will accept redemption in Christ to participate in the body. Batwa, Ojibwa, Euro-Americans, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans will all do it in our own way and God will bless whatever is sincere in our hearts.

None of us, no matter the culture in which we are steeped, can divorce ourselves completely from that culture. What we can do is concede to the reality of this problem. We must honor its power and contend with it.

How do we, then, honor cultures and yet maintain a certain unity of practice? As Anglicans, conformity to form is essential. In our common prayer we seek to be one.

When we strip away a good portion of our human made rules, regulations, customs, and overall cultural assumptions, we find in the American Episcopal tradition a very simple faith. Whittle away at the grand oak we call The Episcopal Church and we find a shape and form which can be used by all types of people. This is exactly what our American forbearers did in adapting Anglicanism to the post-Revolutionary situation.

I find that the Catechism/Outline of the Faith constitutes the best ministry manual for the Church. At the core of the Catechism there is a definition of what is to be the Church, the risen body of Christ. If we can apply this simple message, we will excel in doing effective mission work. To adhere to the plain definition it does not matter if our mission work is in Belize, North Dakota, Bermuda, or Constantinople. This guidance will suffice for building up the body whether we are in mission to young people, elders, suburbanites, urban dwellers, or all the different ethnic groups therein.

The Catechism states these duties to all ministers (lay and ordained) of the Church: "to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work , pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God." (Book of Common Prayer, p.856) That intention can be followed in so many diverse ways.

Of course, it is not as simple as I would like it to be. As soon as the Catechism is read it is interpreted through Dakota, Australian, African-American, Norwegian-American, British cultural eyes and we are right back at the finish. Perhaps it is more about the struggle than the actual perfection. We in mainline denominational structures like to look for the perfect program, manual, or workshop that will solve all that plagues us. That notion is as naïve as my hoping that one compound sentence out of the Catechism will cure our ills.

The struggle is to do as Christ does. Remember Niebuhr's definition of Christ, ".to be related in devotion and obedience to Jesus Christ is to be related to the One to whom he undeviatingly points." (Niebuhr, p.28) This is an unvarnished struggle. Jesus struggled. He fell on his face in the garden and cried, and then summoned his courage and followed the One to whom he pointed the rest of us toward. Surely we can manage to fight our cultural hang-ups and keep struggling back to the source, to God: Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. If Jesus could face his physical death, we can ask him to walk with us as we let some of our cultural commandments face their death.

This is for all of us, not just the upper middle class Euro-American. In this process of converting to Christ and His Church, we will all have to give up something. Parts of our identity will die, but -- like Jesus -- they will be resurrected and live into a new reality of being. All Christians, no matter their politics, skin color, or cultural background, will be forever changed.

Bibliography

Deloria, Jr., *Vine God Is Red: A Native View of Religion* 2nd Edition North American Press (a Division of Fulcrum Publishing): Golden, Colorado 1992

Lyman, Rebecca *Early Christian Tradition* (The New Church's Teaching Series, Vol. 6) Cowley Publications Cambridge * Boston Massachusetts 1999

Niebuhr, H. Richard Christ and Culture Harper Torch Books 1951

Tinker, George E. Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide Fortress Press + Minneapolis 1993

The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version, Oxford University Press: New York, Oxford 1989

Cobbey, Nan They Will Be Changed Forever Episcopal Life, September 2001, Vol. 11 Number 8

"Let love and peace triumph so that your name may be remembered for the good that you have done, the joy that you have brought and the love that you have shared."

Mother Teresa